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On the Occurrence of the *Azarus ubaldus* (Stoll, 1782) in the Maltese Islands (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae)

A. Catania & A. Seguna

Abstract

Azarus ubaldus (Stoll, 1782) is recorded for the Maltese Islands for the first time. Possible larval host plant and adult nectaring sources are included. A vernacular name is proposed.

KEY WORDS: Lepidoptera, Lycaenidae, *Azarus ubaldus*, Maltese Islands.

Sobre la presencia de *Azarus ubaldus* (Stoll, 1782) en Malta (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae)

Resumen

Se registra por primera vez para Malta *Azarus ubaldus* (Stoll, 1782). Posibles plantas nutricias para las larvas y posibles fuentes de néctar de los adultos se incluyen. Se propone un nombre vernáculo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Lepidoptera, Lycaenidae, *Azarus ubaldus*, Malta.

Introduction

On the 13th July 2016, C. Gauci, ornithologist and photographer, uploaded an image (Fig. 2) of a lycaenid butterfly species, taken “in the limits of Mosta” on the social media network “Maltese Entomology and Wildlife group”, asking for help in the determination of the species. The species was promptly identified by the second author as *Azarus ubaldus* (Stoll, 1782), a species new to the lepidopterofauna of Malta. A. Darmanin, another nature photographer uploaded the day after, further images of the same butterfly, this time photographed at Żabbar. A series of other images, by D. Magro and J. Agius appeared on the same social media network immediately after. A short series of specimens was collected by the second author from the vicinity of Mrieħel on the 14th. of the same month. To date, the butterfly has been observed at Marfa Ridge, Dwejra Lines, limits of Rabat, Mosta, Mrieħel, Wied is-Sewda in Attard, Marsa, at Fgura in Wied Blandun, Żabbar, Hal Farrug, Hal Far and Luqa. Practically, these localities cover all of Malta (Fig. 1). In all instances, the butterfly was flying, in fairly good numbers, around the flowers of *Acacia karroo* Hayne. A myrmecophilous associations is noticed with all larval stages. On one occasion, the first author noticed ants of the genus *Crematogaster* Mayr, 1861 namely *Crematogaster scutellaris* (Olivier, 1792) attending a young larva and when disturbed they quickly carried the caterpillar to a “more secure place”.

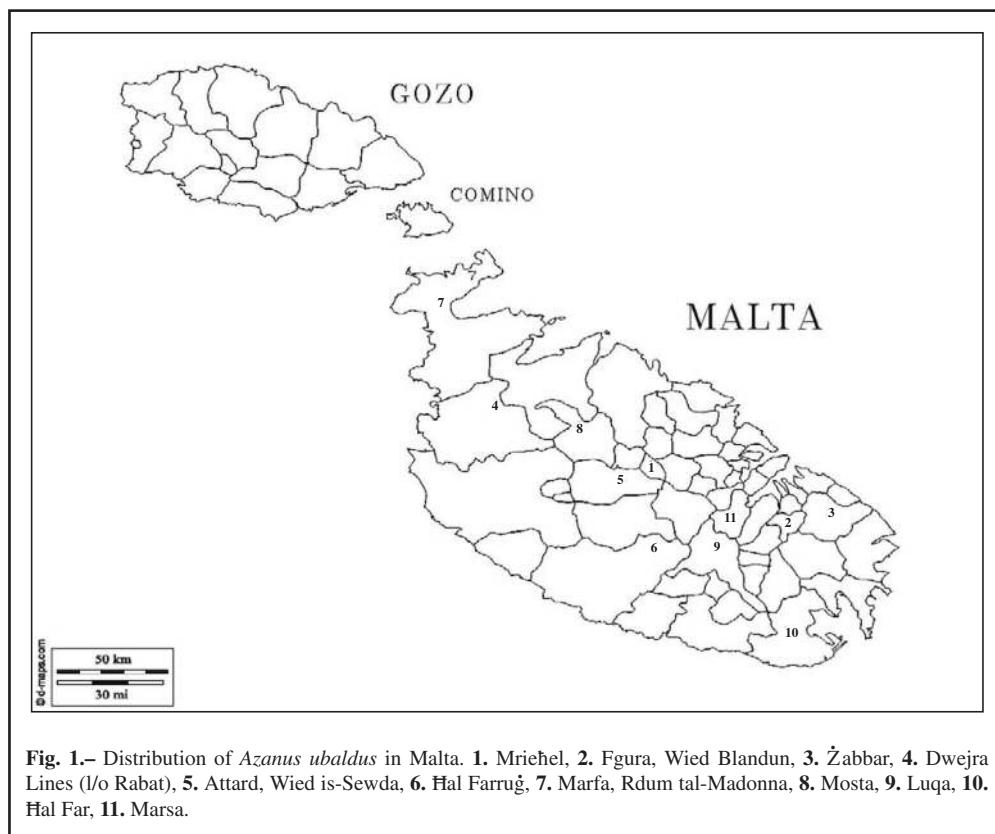


Fig. 1.—Distribution of *Azarus ubaldus* in Malta. **1.** Mriehel, **2.** Fgura, Wied Blandun, **3.** Żabbar, **4.** Dwejra Lines (l/o Rabat), **5.** Attard, Wied Is-Sewda, **6.** Hal Farruġ, **7.** Marfa, Rdum tal-Madonna, **8.** Mosta, **9.** Luqa, **10.** Hal Far, **11.** Marsa.

Material examined

MALTA, 2 ♂♂, 2 ♀♀, Mriehel, 14-VII-2016. A. Seguna leg.; 2 ♂♂, 2 ♀♀, Mriehel, 15-VII-2016. A. Catania leg. (Fig. 3); 2 ♂♂, 1 ♀, Fgura, Wied Blandun, 15-VII-2016. A. Catania leg.; 2 ♂♂, Dwejra Lines, 16-VII-2016. A. Seguna & P. Sammut leg.; 3 ♂♂, 1 ♀, Attard, Wied Is-Sewda, 16-VII-2016. A. Seguna & P. Sammut leg.; 2 ♂♂, 2 ♀♀, Żabbar, 16-VII-2016. A. Catania leg.; 1 ♂, 1 ♀, Hal Farruġ, 17-VII-2016. A. Catania leg.; 1 ♂, Attard, Wied Is-Sewda, 23-VII-2016. A. Catania leg. (Fig. 4).

Discussion: LARSON (1991: 240) describes *Azarus ubaldus* (Stoll, 1782) as having a wide distribution, which includes all of Africa and the Indian subcontinent. D'ABRERA (1980) is more specific and lists South and East Africa, from the Somali Republic to Senegal and North to Tunisia, Arabia and India. TENNANT (1996) adds the Canary Islands in the distribution of *Azarus ubaldus*, while TSHIKOLOVETS (2011) gives the best detailed distribution of this species, especially as regards the countries bordering the Mediterranean. He lists S. and NW Morocco, S. Algeria, Tunisia, E. Egypt (Sinai Peninsula) the Middle East (SE Israel and SW Jordan), the Arabian Peninsula, southern coastal parts of Iran, central and southern Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India and tropical Africa. All these authors describe *Azarus ubaldus* as frequenting hot dry places with Acacia trees and bushes. The first European record for this species is from three male specimens, collected between the 21st and the 30th of April 1982 and present in the collection of M. & J. Delnoye (OLIVIER & VAN DER POORTEN, 1992). Recently this species was recorded from five

specimens collected during September of 2010 from the island of Lampedusa, from the vicinity of *Acacia karroo* Hayne (CAPORALE & GUIDI, 2013).



Figs. 2-4.—**2.** The first photograph of *Azarus ubaldus* taken in Malta by Mr. C. Gauci. **3.** *Azarus ubaldus* adults. Left females and Right males. Photos by A. Catania. **4.** *Azarus ubaldus* larvae on *Acacia karroo* buds and flower. Photos by A. Catania

On the Maltese Islands the species is widely distributed and it appears to be fairly well established. It is unknown how *Azarus ubaldus* (Stoll, 1782) arrived to our shores and for how long it has been in Malta. That it was introduced with its larval hostplant is improbable as most *Acacia karroo* trees growing in Malta have been here for several years, mostly planted in afforestation projects in the sixties and seventies of the last century. Both adults and larvae (Fig 4) have been recorded, and the fact that it has also established a symbiotic relationship with ants does not make the species a “very recent” introduction. Most probably it has been with us for some years and has been overlooked all the time. With us the species has been observed only in the vicinity of the spiny *Acacia karroo*. Elsewhere it appears to be attracted to *Acacia raddiana* (Savi) and *Acacia seyal* Delile (RUNG, 1981). This latter species morphologically resembles *A. karroo* in being also a spiny Acacia. OLIVIER & VAN DER POORTEN (1992) state that larva, are attended by ants from the genera *Camponotus* & *Prenolepis* Mayr, 1861 (fide HINTON, 1951: 146)

Conclusion: Whereas both from the island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean, and the Canary Islands in the Atlantic, *Azarus ubaldus* appear to have found a foothold, in Malta it gives us the impression as if it were an indigenous species. At present it is not known from the sister island of Gozo or the other smaller islands which make up the Maltese archipelago. Other species of Acacia occur on Malta. These generally flower earlier than *A. karroo*. At present it is not known whether the species uses these Acacias for egg-laying, as larval hostplant or as adult nectaring sources.

Summer in Malta is long, hot and dry, with temperatures reaching the mid-30s. It is worthy of

notice that rainfall during winter of 2016 was merely 99.6 mm (yearly average 530 mm) and the winter temperature was the warmest of the last 93 years (MIA, 2016). At the time *Azanus ubaldus* was discovered, except for small oasis where summer crops are irrigated, Malta resembles the dry breeding grounds general described in the literature.

For this species, the authors propose the vernacular name Farfett Ikhali tat-Tikek.

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